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ABSTRACT

In general, retention at any grade level has not improved student achievement or social adjustment. Skimpy data on transition rooms seem to indicate that they are not very successful either. The reasons that have been given to explain why retention has not worked range from the school's inability to diagnose student needs to rigid curriculum and modes of instruction which have not addressed the culture, style, or initial skill level of incoming children. Mere repetition of a given grade has only served to widen the gap between retained and promoted children. When retention has worked, it has been in the earliest grades, when diagnosis has been careful and accurate; special resources have been applied; and individual needs and styles have been given close attention. Sections of this research brief: (1) provide background information on nonpromotion; (2) probe related issues; (3) outline decision models for retention-promotion policies; and (4) indicate alternatives to retention. (RH)

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RETENTION/PROMOTION/TRANSITION

In The Early Grades

A Research Brief

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RETENTION/PROMOTION/TRANSITION IN THE EARLY GRADES

A RESEARCH BRIEF

Generally, retention at any grade level has not improved student achievement or social adjustment. Skimpy data on transition rooms seems to indicate that they are not very successful either. A variety of reasons has been given to explain why retention has not worked, ranging from the school's inability to diagnose students' needs to rigid curriculum and modes of instruction which have not addressed the culture, style or initial skill level of incoming children. Mere repetition of a given grade has only served to widen the gap between retained and promoted children. When retention HAS worked, it has been in the earliest grades, when diagnosis has been careful and accurate, special resources have been applied and individual needs and styles have been given careful attention.

BACKGROUND

A review of the research on non-promotion of students reveals that this has been a topic of intense interest since the early 1900s. Over the last 80 years general agreement has developed that:

Non-promotion seldom aids achievement.

In fact, non-promotion may be more of a deterrent than a stimulus to achievement.

Non-promotion has a negative effect on students' social adjustment and development, especially after the earliest grades.

(Some studies even suggest that the threat of non-promotion works best with students who are in no danger of failing.)

However, several studies have shown that from 30 to 69% of children have indeed benefited from retention, when their difficulties and readiness were carefully diagnosed. And other studies have shown that the negative socio-emotional effects of being retained are less in kindergarten and the first grade than later on in a child's school career. The following two representative studies entered into the ERIC System in the 1980s typify what has been found out about retention.

Jonathan Sandoval of the University of California - Davis, reported a study in 1981 in which students recommended by their teachers for retention at the end of Grade 1, were divided into two groups. Half were retained and half promoted to Grade 2. A "significant minority" -- 38% -- of those who were retained in Grade 1 achieved at the same level as those from the group who had been promoted to the second grade. This minority had a better self-concept than their promoted peers, presumably because the 38% group were in the top third of their new first grade class. One has to remember, however, that some 62% of those who repeated the first grade did NOT do as well as their peers who had been promoted to Grade 2, clearly a significant majority. Most important for success when retained in the first grade, Sandoval found, were the initial level of academic skills, emotional development and social skills. In other words, the successful repeaters had been

pretty much up to speed at the end of Grade 1 but had not performed quite well enough for their teachers to recommend their promotion. Physical size, visual-motor development, family background, early life or teacher philosophy -- all elements thought to be important by other researchers -- were found by Sandoval not to be important factors in the success of the 38% retainee group.

A second study reported by Augustine McDaniel in 1986 was conducted in an urban school district in southeastern Florida, to assess the effects of a promotion-retention policy under which 17% of students were retained in the first grade every year over a five-year period. Those who were retained were made a top priority for resources such as peer and adult tutoring and Chapter I remediation resources in reading and mathematics. McDaniel's findings showed that retention under these circumstances was more beneficial up to the third grade than later on; that those who were retained made greater gains than students who were promoted, but that their achievement stayed lower overall.

If students come to school lacking skills and do not perform well, McDaniel concluded, nothing is accomplished by their merely repeating the same program (or grade). Students have to establish a foundation of skills; the prerequisite skills must be in place before they can achieve at grade level. These skills, which he identified as primarily social and language skills, must be accurately assessed and if students do not have these skills when they enter school, he stressed, they must be identified and taught. The variability in instruction from class to class is sometimes at fault, he determined. Clear instructional goals are needed, and appropriate learning experiences must be provided.

ISSUES

Increasingly, the question has been asked, WHY doesn't retention work? Most answers stress that the causes of student failure have not been addressed in the retention programs. The evidence that a disproportionate number of those retained are minority and/or poor children has led many to the conclusion that the school program generally does not address the needs of students who come to it, who, as John Goodlad puts it in the February 1988 Educational Leadership, do not "take readily to the customs and regularities of schooling." Others see the early curriculum itself as the major obstacle. Smith and Shepard, in the October 1987 Phi Delta Kappan, note that kindergarten classrooms which stress many things to learn and many ways to learn them are able to cope with "levels of competence from pre-primer to sixth-grade reading levels." Other classrooms which stress "literacy and numeracy" are not able to accommodate this range of student abilities. Consequently, "when the curriculum is taken for granted, the child who does not keep pace is labeled as a failure." Many others have also begun to tell us that it is the nature of the diagnosis and intervention with each individual child that primarily determines whether the so-called "at-risk" child will be failed by the school or not.

In 1985-86, Phi Delta Kappan's Center on Evaluation, Development and Research published a compilation of research reports and journal articles on retention-promotion to assist educators in sorting out these issues. One selection identified the long-time philosophical issues, which have generated emotional responses for many years:

The question of student failure as negative reinforcement, and its effect on student motivation

The question of who is responsible for student learning

Another selection, from the Harvard Educational Review, identified a recent "get-tough" approach as a new key factor in present decision-making about retention. This approach appears to be brought on by a public cry for accountability and for improving student achievement. It includes such beliefs as:

Lowered promotional standards reflect and encourage a general decline in standards in American society.

Promoting students who have not mastered grade level material is a form of dishonesty and rewards lazy students.

Social promotion is an example of a more general problem of schools' "pandering" to students, promoting the unqualified by adjusting curriculum and instruction to the needs and wishes of students.

Setting low achievement standards fosters low achievement expectations.

Even the Gallup Poll reported in 1983 that "promotion from grade to grade based on examinations and not on 'social promotion' is favored by a substantial majority (75%) of survey respondents...parents of school children and those who have no children in school."

An analysis of this "get-tough" approach in a third PDK selection, however, uncovers assumptions which are not validated by research. For example, the assumption that retention will produce mastery of subject matter is contradicted by the research evidence showing that promoted students of the same ability learn more than those who are not promoted. Similarly, the assumption that retention will allow retained students time to mature is contradicted by the research finding that retained pupils most often regress and stay progressively farther behind their contemporaries as they move through the grades.

Other reviews of the research agree that retention alone will not accomplish its goal. In a presentation at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in April 1986, Lorrie Shepard of the University of Colorado concluded a presentation of kindergarten/pre-first research saying, "Successful programs were those which responded to individual differences in readiness....in one study of extra-year program, the biggest gains were not for the extra-year children but for the at-risk children who received extra help in the regular classroom.

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT RETENTION

The overriding message is that:

Non-promotion generally fails to benefit students with either academic or adjustment problems, as defined by standard tests and/or teacher ratings.

Adjustment problems resulting from retention are not necessarily significant at the first grade but become so later on.

At-risk children may best be helped by better diagnosis and assistance in the regular classroom.

IF students are retained, it is imperative to assess the causes of student failure and address those causes.

In other words, if students are retained, mere repetition of the grade is not sufficient. Something different must be done, addressing the deficiencies which caused students to fail.

DECISION MODELS FOR RETENTION-PROMOTION POLICIES

PDK includes in its book, a number of suggested decision models for those who may wish to build school policies about retention-promotion. These models include adaptations of the Light's Retention Scale and other proposed categories to consider in making retention-promotion decisions:

"Child Factors", such as"

- Physical disabilities
- Physical size
- Learning rate
- Psychosocial and neurological maturity
- Self-concept
- Ability to function independently
- Absenteeism
- Attitude toward retention

"Family Factors", such as:

- Geographical moves
- Attitute toward retention
- Sibling pressure

"School Factors", such as:

- System attitude toward retention
- Availability of special education services or other options
- Availability of personnel

The common theme in these selections is that no single criterion, such as test scores, should be used for determining who will or will not be promoted/retained.

An Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) selection in the PDK book bluntly suggests further that "the overt and covert interests of all stakeholders in (any) plan need to be assessed."

ASCD suggests a need to examine teacher and school behaviors which work against low-achieving students, especially those from minority groups.

Goodlad says, "The school's general failure to provide for, let alone capitalize on, different kinds of intelligence and styles of learning resulted (in 1955) in clearly prejudicial practices....children not admitted to kindergarten or retained for another year at grade level were disproportionately from minority and low economic groups. These practices and others like them are common in today's schools....nowhere in schooling do the misconceptions....about learning....about individual differences....have a more powerful effect than in the grouping and tracking practices commonly found in schools."

It seems clear that if retention-promotion policies are to benefit students, they must address any school and teacher causes of student failure as well as causes within the students themselves.

ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION

Alternatives to retention suggested in the PDK compilation include:

- Increased attention and diagnosis of difficulties in the regular classroom
- Rigorous measures of achievement and evaluation of promotion standards in any retention-promotion policy or program.
- Examination of the potential of transition rooms

Smith and Shepard's proposed alternatives include: "Flexible standards of competence in the primary grades; the delay of testing for purposes of accountability; flexible arrangements that decrease grade isolation; a variety of curricula and the use of instructional practices that take into consideration natural variations in achievement, ability, linguistic competence and background; and the provision of services that enhance opportunities to learn and prevent failure, such as tutoring, summer school, learning laboratories, guidance services, parent education and individualized instruction."

Goodlad calls for re-structuring also. "Rather than the typical classroom patterns of children of the same age engaged in competitive, whole-group instruction, students need to be clustered in small groups exchanging ideas, sometimes working on separate but interrelated tasks, and generally helping each other learn....Classroom rewards need to be based on shared goals and accomplishments; individual awards, on improvement."

Peer tutoring and cooperative learning activities to improve student achievement are documented elsewhere in educational research.

At least one school district (Ohio County Schools in Wheeling, West Virginia) has turned to full-day kindergarten as a treatment for at-risk students in the earliest grades. Although the afternoon curriculum in this case is a repetition of the morning one, with no special intervention strategies noted, the full-day group did significantly better than those in the half-day program in the development of cognitive and physical maturity and made "less dramatic improvements" in social/emotional maturity.

THE TRANSITION ROOM ALTERNATIVE

Transition or pre-first programs seem to have been equally unlikely to increase student achievement, although not much data is available on them.

The PDK selection discussing transition rooms notes that they have been inconclusively studied, and makes the following recommendations:

- Better record-keeping for evaluating transition rooms
- Continuous re-integration of students from transition rooms into regular classrooms
- Greater attention to at-risk children in the regular classroom
- The use of transition rooms, if any, primarily at the kindergarten level

The selection also notes the problem of possible discrimination in transition rooms, as students generally found in these programs are most often boys. (Goodlad reminds us that as far back as his 1955 study - with little change today - "Grade failures of boys in the primary grades, with the accompanying labeling of them as failures, exceeded grade retention of girls by two or three times.")

Other studies of transition rooms support the PDK selection's caution, showing no significant differences in achievement between children in transition or pre-first classes and children of similar ability who are promoted with no further treatment.

SUMMARY

Overall, then, the research tells us that non-promotion generally does not help student achievement or adjustment; if students are to be retained, the best time to do it is in the earlier grades; and finally, any intervention method -- retention, transition program or treatment in the regular classroom -- must include careful diagnosis of the causes of failure, on the part of the school program as well as the child, and appropriate remediation case by case.

- J. Newman
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